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Review of: Transatlantic echoes: Alexander von Humbolt
in World Literature and Cosmos and Colonialism:
Alexander von Humbolt in Cultural Criticism.

by Frank Baron

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sich mit dem Thema der deutschen Auswanderung nach Amerika vertraut machen möchten.

Covington, Louisiana

Brigitta L. Malm

Transatlantic Echoes: Alexander von Humboldt in World Literature and Cosmos and Colonialism: Alexander von Humboldt in Cultural Criticism.

Edited by Rex Clark and Oliver Lubrich. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012. Vol. 1. 465 pp. Vol. 2. 357 pp. \$120.00.

Rex Clark and Oliver Lubrich have assembled 150 individual contributions in two volumes about Alexander von Humboldt over a period of about 200 years. In the first volume the editors drew one hundred texts about Humboldt from a broad range of literary genres: poetry, drama, novels, novellas, letters, essays, newspapers articles, scholarly papers, film scripts, comic books, and works of non-fiction. Forty-eight of them came from authors of the German language, twenty-two from English-speaking authors, nineteen from Latin-American writers, eight from French, and three from Scandinavian languages, authors such as Goethe, Byron, Bolívar, Darwin, Emerson, Thoreau, Balzac, Poe, Heine, Church, Whitman, Verne, Strindberg, Huxley, Pound, Neruda, Márquez, Enzensberger, etc. The second volume of fifty texts (in approximately the same ratio of original languages) were selected on a different basis. In this case the focus is on critical interpretation, reflecting diverse views on Humboldt's historical significance, his contributions in scientific, intellectual, social and cultural interpretation. In this volume the texts often have the character of essays. The list of authors includes, for example, Agassiz, Burckhardt, Heinzen, Nietzsche, da Cunha, Sucre, Ortiz, Kisch, Lima, Honecker, Blumenberg, Pratt, and Müller. In the first volume the texts are often shorter; whereas the second volume generally explores issues in greater detail. In both volumes Clark and Lubrich, who explain the basis for their choice of authors and texts in the introductions, stress the common basis, the fact that the reader has the benefit of the most significant and representative examples in the history of Humboldt's reception.

There is no doubt that these volumes combine the most comprehensive collection of texts for the colorful and shifting history of Humboldt's fame. The cursory glance over the names appears to contradict the perception that Humboldt's influence lost its magic by the second half of the nineteenth century. There is evidence here that even today Humboldt's impact is felt in

Europe just as much as in North and South America.

It would not be fair to judge these two books in the strict tradition of reception studies. Nicolaas A. Rupke's recent metabiography of Humboldt is an attempt to reconstruct the phases of Humboldt reception in Germany during the last two hundred years and succeeds in identifying six different "Humboldts" in the process. In each period Humboldt was "aggressively recreated to suit contemporaneous needs." For this kind of meticulous investigation the widely dispersed texts that Clark and Lubrich selected are not appropriate. For that kind of reception history each selected text would have to have its own introduction, context, and analysis. The clear transitions from one text to another would have to be evident. For example, the reception in the United States would have to begin with Humboldt's visit in Philadelphia and Washington and Philadelphia with the consideration of reactions to Humboldt by Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Albert Gallatin, and Charles Wilson Peale. There would have to be consideration of Humboldt's first travel narrative, the "Philadelphia Abstract," and a narrative about how his fame spread quickly in Washington and Boston newspapers and journals. How did this fame spread during the first three decades of the nineteenth century? An intensive study of reception would also have to take account of Humboldt's impact on modern American environmentalism and show its evolution. How did Humboldt influence men like John Muir and the less famous men before him? Such an attempt occurred recently in Aaron Sachs's *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (2005). The earliest notice of Humboldt in North America in the volumes under consideration occurs with Emerson (1833) and Thoreau (1842), and that suggests a totally different approach to the concept of reception. Clark and Lubrich evidently see the real significance of Humboldt's reception in the transatlantic exchanges and the initiation of a worldwide intercultural dialogue. In other words, their focus is much less on the details and phases of reception than on the transmission and the destiny of ideas; less on the scientific sphere and more on the areas of historical, social and political issues. That this project goes in a different direction becomes abundantly clear in the editors' introductions.

In the essay on "The Napoleon of Science" (1850) Henry Theodore Tuckerman writes of Humboldt that his "great distinction is the comprehensive view he takes of the laws and facts of the physical world. No naturalist ever so united minute observation with the ability to generalize . . . He intuitively recognized the unity of nature . . ." and Tuckerman adds that in this process Humboldt "weds nature to humanity." Throughout the two volumes the reader can sense a tendency for Humboldtian science to become a powerful force to promote social and political change. This sentiment is reflected in the

motto, which Karl Heinzen (1869), one of the radical veteran of the 1848/49 revolution, places as motto at the outset of his essay: "Truth is its own object, but it is of value only for humanity's sake." Heinzen sees Humboldt as a liberator. He was "the enemy of every species of slavery." A speech by Kerstin Müller, the German Minister of State, in Madrid in 2005 confirms that Humboldtian science had the potential to transcend disciplines and cultures: "Humboldt," she said, "was not only a mediator between different scientific disciplines, he was also a mediator between cultures." Latin American authors such as Bolívar (1822), de Sousa Andrada (1884), Sucre (1923), Ortiz (1930), Ortiz (1940), Lima (1958), and Medina (1965) reflect an undiminished appreciation of Humboldt's relevance in this respect.

For the editors it is important to demonstrate Humboldt's significance in the in the broad spectrum of colonial history and the debates of postcolonial theory. In reviewing a history of Humboldt reception in Mexico, Medina sees a disturbing ambivalence in his political appropriation: "To invoke the name of Humboldt became an almost an historical constant of all politicians, historians, and thinkers of the nineteenth century." Medina takes his own turn in this practice when he observes that information acquired by Humboldt from the trusting archivists of Mexico found its way, through Humboldt's generosity, into the hands of Thomas Jefferson and other American politicians in Washington, and it served as the basis of future imperial expansion and conquest at the cost of Mexico. The plan for a canal that Humboldt proposed in the Panama region would also serve, according to Medina, the imperial interests of the United States. Medina's evaluation of the unfortunate implications in Humboldt's legacy is outweighed, however, by the positive assessments by other Latin American authors. In several essays the reader discovers debates about Humboldt's relation to colonialism. In general, Humboldt is thought to have played a subversive role, reflected in observations of Ortiz and Rojas, that independence in South America was the "logical corollary of the creation of the republic of North America."

By laboriously assembling, and in many cases translating, an impressive number of texts from remote corners of libraries and collections, Clark and Lubrich have provided a valuable service to scholars and the general public. In this process they have filled a neglected space in the literature about Humboldt. They have pointed to the issues of colonialism and integrated Latin American voices and into the dialogue about Humboldt, a dialogue that concerns primarily Latin America, the world that Humboldt treated so exhaustively in his twenty-nine volumes.